ABUNDANCE

Timothy Eaton Church
Toronto, Canada
July 23, 2000

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Exodus 16: 1-4
Mark 6: 30-44

I will never hear that story again—the story of the loaves and fishes; of such a crowd fed by such a modest amount of food—a story of what Jesus can do with seemingly insignificant resources, without remembering a day three years ago.

I was in Ocijek, Croatia. Sue and I and some officials from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Worldwide Ministries Division were there to visit and bring greetings and encouragement to the Croatian Reformed Church, the Roman Catholic hierarchy and politicians, and specifically to visit our partners in mission at the Evangelical Theological Seminary and to the Agape Project.

The Agape Project focuses on ministry with refugees—part of the very difficult situation in Central Europe is the presence of hundreds of thousands of refugees: people of one ethnic-religious

community who suddenly find themselves displaced, homeless and without resources and hope: Bosnian Muslims in Croatia, Croatian Catholics in Serbia, Serbian Orthodox in Bosnia-Herzegovina. None of the states has resources or in some cases, it seemed to us, the will to deal with the situation. So Agape stands in a very real way between life and death, hope and despair.

Agape sponsors feeding centers which provide soup and a loaf of bread to refugees daily. At the center I visited, the people in line

were all Muslims who had lived for years in a village outside Ocijek —which had been attacked and occupied by Serbian forces.

The Serbs took away the men and boys and executed them, raped many of the women, leveled many houses and moved Serbian people into the rest.

The people waiting in line for food were all women. They bring their containers for the soup: pots, jars, jugs, even a scrub bucket —for one ladle of soup per person, one loaf of bread for every two. We were warned that they are sometimes hostile toward Americans.

I was asked to ladle soup, for a picture which I did very self-consciously. On the way out, a Muslim woman asked who we were. Our translator told her—they are Christians from America. They provide this food. She took my hand in hers and began to weep, looked me directly in the eye and through the interpreter she said, “Tell him that my husband and son are both dead. My home is gone. I have nothing. Tell him I say thank God for him.”

Such a great need and such a modest amount of food, but it was salvation for her, literally, and it was a means of grace, an expression of God’s love in Jesus Christ.

One time something happened that forever changed the way his friends thought about him and about their own lives.

He had called disciples. They had traveled with him as he walked through Galilee teaching in synagogues, healing, proclaiming the nearness of God’s kingdom. People heard him eagerly—what he said, the way he said it, the way he welcomed all, healed all—was new, refreshing food for their deepest hunger.

And so his reputation spread and the crowds who came to see, hear, receiving blessing, grew. Now they were bringing elderly, crippled, sick, children—following him from town to town.

And it is to get away for a moment for a rest, that Jesus and his friends are up on a mountain for a small Sabbath. But here comes the crowd again to hear him.

And Jesus asks Philip, “How are we going to feed all these people?” Nobody has mentioned food. They have come for healing and comfort and encouragement and restoration, but

Jesus is thinking about dinner. I like that about him. It is lunch time and its been a long morning.

What happens next is pretty funny actually. The writer meant it to be, I believe. Philip's answer—dinner? Buy dinner for this crowd? Why six months' wages wouldn't buy them airline peanuts.

In other presentations, the disciples look around a bit, and from among themselves come up with a few loaves of bread and a few fish. In John's Gospel, it's a little boy whom Andrew finds who

contributes the five loaves and two fish. Did he volunteer or did Andrew volunteer for him—or confiscate his lunch?

“Make the people sit down.” First he prayed. “Blessed are thou, O Lord, our God, King of the universe, who bringest forth bread from the earth.”

He prayed the ancient Hebrew blessing his people had prayed for centuries. No Jew ever prayed that prayer or heard that prayer, in synagogue, around the family table, in ghettos, refugee camps, concentration camps, extermination camps—no Jew hears that

prayer without remembering one of their oldest and most precious stories and its promise: about people in the wilderness and their hunger and how God provides manna to eat and saves them.

And so, Jesus feeds them. And it is enough for their hunger. Abundant, in fact. More food than they can eat. So much food that after 5,000 people eat, there are twelve baskets of leftover fragments.

I heard Parker Palmer talk about this story and he told about being in an airplane that pulled away from the gate, taxied out to a

corner of the field and stopped. The pilot came on and said, “I have some bad news and some really bad news. The bad news is that the airport where we are headed is socked in, shut down. We’ve looked at the alternatives and there are none. So we’re staying here for a few hours. That’s the bad news. The really bad news is that we have no food and it’s lunch time.” Everybody groaned. Some passengers started to get angry but then, Palmer says, the flight attendant did something incredible.

She came on, “Now I know for some of you this is a big deal. Some of you are really hungry and were looking forward to a nice

lunch. Some of you have a medical condition and really need lunch. Some of you may not care much one way or the other and some of you need to skip lunch. So, I'll tell you what we're going to do. I have a couple of bread baskets here and we're gong to pass them around and I'm asking everybody to put something in the basket. Some of you brought a little snack along—some peanut butter crackers, candy bars, and some of you have a few LifeSavers, or chewing gum or Roll-Aides. And if you don't have anything edible, you have a picture of your children or spouse or girlfriend/boyfriend or a bookmark or business card. Everybody put something in and then we'll reverse the process. We'll pass

the baskets around and everyone can take out what he or she needs."

"Well," Palmer said, "what happened next was wonderful. The griping stopped. People started to root around in pockets and handbags. Some even got up and opened luggage stored overhead and got out boxes of candy, a bottle of wine. People were laughing and talking. She had transformed an angry community, focused on its own need and deprivation, into a community of sharing and celebration."

After the flight, which eventually did proceed, Parker Palmer stopped on his way off the plane and said to her, “Do you know there’s a story in the Bible about what you did back there? It’s about Jesus feeding a lot of people with very little food.” “Yes,” she said, “I know that story. That’s why I did what I did.”

That’s what God’s Kingdom looks like—abundance shared; available resources multiplied when people bring what they have to be shared with all.

It’s a challenging story. All of Mark’s pictures of God’s Kingdom challenge the status quo, this one particularly. Walter Brueggemann writes:

> “The majority of the world’s resources pour into North America. And as we Americans grow more and more wealthy, money is becoming a kind of narcotic for us. We hardly notice our prosperity or the poverty of so many others.” (“The Liturgy of Abundance: The Myth of Scarcity,” *The Christian Century,* 3/24-31/99)

We have a friend from Romania who is a United States citizen and who, a few years ago, was able to bring her Romanian mother to Chicago for a visit. When the daughter took her mother grocery shopping to Treasure Island, and they walked to the fresh produce department, with that glorious kaleidoscope of bright colors: oranges, limes, lemons, grapefruit, apples, peaches, pears, piles of grapes; and then, opposite, five varieties of lettuce, cabbage, red and white onions, mountains of potatoes, mushrooms, celery, turnips, pale and deep green, with a fine mist glistening on everything. And the elderly Romanian woman burst into tears. She had never seen anything like it, had never seen so much food,

fresh, beautiful food, in her life. And she would not believe that it would all be there again the next day, insisted that her daughter take her—not to the Sears Tower or Marshall Fields, or the zoo, but to the fresh produce department of Treasure Island every day to see the food.

“We hardly notice our prosperity . . , We have invested our lives in consumerism,” Brueggemann says; “We have a love affair with ‘more’ and we will never have enough.”

Brueggemann’s thesis is that we believe more in a myth of scarcity than in the reality of abundance. We believe, Brueggemann says, that there is not enough for everybody so we have to get more. Political tyranny, Brueggemann says, begins in the Bible when, in times of famine, Pharaoh says, “let’s get it all.” When you believe in scarcity, you can never have enough.

When you believe more in scarcity than you do in abundance, you can’t get enough. Brueggemann has a wonderful image of it. “If you are like me,” he says, “while you read the Bible you keep looking at the screen to see how the market is doing. If you are

like me, you read the Bible on a good day, but you read the Nike ads every day. And according to the Nike ads, whoever dies with the most shoes wins—whatever you end up with is what you have managed to get for yourself.”

The challenging word of the Bible is about abundance, the adequacy of God’s gifts to fulfill our deepest needs, our most urgent hunger. There is enough.

When the children of Israel saw the flaky white substance lying all around the ground every morning, they said, “What is this

stuff?”—the Hebrew for which is “manna,” God’s gifts—right in front of your eyes—God’s abundance which requires only human ingenuity and creativity and enterprise to be adequate. Only you can’t save it up and hoard it. It spoils. You can only live in trust that it will be there again in the morning.

The word here for the church and for each of us is this. God’s abundance is beyond our ability to understand or imagine: and, in a sense, in a way you and I can never understand, so is ours. What we have is enough—more than enough. It’s a basic attitude toward life, actually.

In Annie Dillard's fine book, *The Writing Life,* which is a reflection on the craft of writing but in actuality, is an essay on living, she wrote:

> "One of the things I know about writing (substitute living) is this: spend it all: shoot it: play it: lose it, all, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later place in the book, or for another book: give it, give it all, give it now. The impulse to save something good for another place later is the signal to spend it now. Something more will arise for later,

> something better. These things fill from behind, from beneath, like well water. Anything you do not give freely and abundantly becomes lost to you. You open your safe and find ashes." (p.78-79)

When Jesus shifted the focus from looking at those loaves and fishes as a scarce resource to be saved, conserved, hoarded, to looking at them as a precious gift from God, a resource to be used and shared, he moved from fear to love and from death to life. From despair over the fact that meager personal resources are not adequate for huge problems, to joy over the discovery that when

we bring what we have, God multiplies, empowers, creates and provides. (See Henri Nouwen, *Lifesigns,* p.69)

The word itself is the bread of life. To know and to live like that is to be saved. To commit our life, our skills, our education, our energy and passion, our resources—everything—to God and God's Kingdom on earth, to offer up our loaves and fishes is, quite simply, to be gloriously alive.

It is an option—a real alternative, you know. We can trust him. We can stop despairing that our meager personal resources are not

adequate, that our problems are much larger than our ability to solve them, that we don’t have enough time or money or energy or intelligence or imagination—to meet the challenges we are facing this week as parents, as spouses, in our intimate relationships, that we don’t have enough to meet the challenges at work, or in our families, or our careers, our own health. We could, you know, risk trusting the opposite of that litany of scarcity that drives and determines so much of our lives—risk trusting that when we bring what we have, when we offer what we have to whatever challenge is facing us, God multiplies, empowers, uses, creates and provides.

He took the meagerest of resources, five loaves and two fish and transformed them into an abundance, adequate—more than adequate, for the needs of the people following him.

That is the promise to you and me. We believe He is the bread of life, He is the food we most desperately need. And to trust Him—to commit our lives, everything we have and are and will be to Him—our skills, our resources, our education, our time—to offer up our loaves and fishes, is to know His gracious generosity and His

power to transform our scarcity into abundance. It is to be, quite simply, gloriously alive, saved, free.

There is enough.

There will be enough, more than enough, a generous overflowing abundance of love and grace and provision and food.

Thanks be to God.